

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Editors' Introduction: Materializing Immaterial Labor in Cultural Studies

by Robert F. Carley, Stefanie A. Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula

| Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT This introduction frames the six original articles in this issue and the forum on "Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope" around the concept of immaterial labor. Two full years into a pandemic that has uprooted place-based work for many, and forced even more indoors, away from public spaces, and onto screens, we reflect on the very material effects of present-day immaterial and emotional labor.

KEYWORDS cultural studies, immaterial labor, pandemic, COVID-19, class

The concept of immaterial labor has cut a wide swath into contemporary cultural studies' theoretical, conceptual, and interpretive terrain. For example, this issue's lead article by Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, "First-Person Shooters, Tunnel Warfare, and the Racial Infrastructures of the US-Mexico Border," <<https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/first-person-shooters-tunnel-warfare-racial-infrastructures-us-mexico-border-llamas-rodriguez/>> considers the way that the virtual modeling and gamification of the border is connected to the very real and material infrastructures, institutions, and industries that constitute it concretely. As a concept, immaterial labor provides insight into the relationships that mediate culture (or culture industries), labor, and the commodity form. According to Maurizio Lazzarato:

The concept of immaterial labor refers to *two different aspects* of labor. On the one hand, as regards the "informational content" of the commodity, it refers directly to the changes taking place in workers' labor processes in big companies in the industrial and tertiary sectors, where the skills involved in direct labor are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control (and horizontal and vertical communication). On the other hand, as regards the activity that produces the "cultural content" of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work" — in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.¹

The labor process has clearly altered what we mean when we talk about work, but has it changed our understanding of class? It can, when we view it in a broader context.

Lazzarato's definition of immaterial labor is part of a larger "tradition" that views technological changes in the labor process as a large piece in the puzzle that constitutes class struggles. The metaphor of a puzzle is particularly apt since, as Mario Tronti asserted, "Nobody has discovered anything more about the working class after Marx; it still remains an unknown continent. One knows for certain that it exists, because everyone has heard it speak, and anyone can hear fables about it. But no one can say: I have seen and understood."²

The labor process was significantly changed in the era of post-war industrial capital. Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri, and, especially, Romano Alquati (and others) began to de-emphasize the centrality of class consciousness (a late nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century concept) to the political process within (and in some cases against) which classes struggle and, instead, saw, especially through Alquati's writing on the Fiat and Olivetti factories, that technical changes to the labor process were connected to the political, organizational, and strategic activity of classes. The technical aspects of the production process informed the ways that workers struggled, strategized, and organized. It was also these technical aspects of the labor process that could be used to break the back of worker movements and alter the terrain of class struggles.

This class analysis can be extended beyond post-war Italy. The contemporary service sector, grown in the era of global neoliberalism, presents a similar period of transformed labor processes, and might therefore offer concomitant transformations in class struggle, organizing, and strategy—as well as a similarly-altered terrain for breaking the worker's movement. One example is found in conceptual shifts (driven by broader social and economic forces and neatly embodied in universities' administrative strata) at colleges and universities that have both amplified and warped relations amongst university workers and between students and faculty. The conversion of tenure track and tenured faculty lines to instructional, lecturer, and adjunct positions is one structural outcome of the contradictions that all universities face, but especially public and state schools. The experiences of overwhelmed and overburdened non-tenure line and other precarious faculty (such as women and trans faculty of color and disabled faculty) are amplified by the kinds of immaterial services they provide to students. And, as more faculty find themselves in increasingly precarious circumstances in addition to negotiating the precarious situations of their students, immaterial labor, in this context, can be specified through Sara Warner's description of a "rage slave." According to Warner, "A rage slave is a wage slave in a service economy, someone who sells both her labor power and her emotions" under the threat of starvation and poverty.³ There are many attendant problems with using "slave" as an abstract or analogous concept in a world where slavery both was and is real. But Warner's concept of laboring and emoting under threat is nonetheless valuable. The university's expanded demands for emotional labor is first and foremost another form of speedup, "accelerated output without increased pay."⁴ Indeed, Warner cautions us against utopic hopes for emotional labor, noting "Affective labor often results in the double exploitation of workers, in the commodification of their bodies and emotions."⁵

If these are shifted/shifting labor processes, what strategies might be learned from the technical process of laboring immaterially? What does it take to produce a sense of

community meaning and belonging, and in particular to produce the workplace or the classroom as a site of that community meaning and belonging? The collective grief, numbness, and despair of two years of laboring through a pandemic has shown the production of the academy as a space/practice of immaterial labor, has revealed the cracks in the veneer of “productivity” that hide this work as service industry work. What might it mean to learn from this period of collective (although by no means universal) mourning? After the death of a loved one, or the loss of hundreds of thousands of strangers, the cost of faking your smile has increased. Of small talk in the elevator; of a polite and timely reply to an email; of attention in a committee meeting; of using a screen to generate human connection rather than withdraw from it. What parts of the academy that we wish to change does our immaterial labor uphold? What might it mean to learn from the numerous powerful workers’ responses to the capital strike, in and beyond #Striketober? How might we utilize that #Striketober energy to transform these conditions?⁶

In media and cultural studies, recent work on platform or app-based service sector labor has begun to focus on the ways that workers have captured and developed new media and communication technologies to serve class struggles. In the introduction to *The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence*, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Todd Wolfson, Brian Dolber, and Chenjerai Kumanyika describe how the creation of an organizing platform for the Rideshare Drivers United union in Los Angeles, California served to build “. . . its membership base throughout the prior year, using a hybrid online and face-to-face organizing strategy that integrated communications across an organizing app they developed in-house with advertising on social media, text messaging, phone calls, and one-on-one conversations”⁷. Seen through the lenses of immaterial labor and class composition, these first salvos in what could comprise a new class struggle require us to think with both concepts. The immaterial or communicative labor necessary to arrange services (what Lazzarato refers to above as activities not normally recognized as work) became the foundations for creating an oppositional platform through which a politically and technologically decomposing working class—reeling from the long neoliberal conjuncture—began to recompose; to draw from the technological conditions of the labor process and create new means of organization and struggle.

Cultural studies would do well to keep its eyes fixed on both sides of the ledger: the immaterial and material; class struggle and commodity production; labor and capital. As cultural studies continues to consider the role that immaterial forms of culture play in contemporary culture industries’ labor processes, it mustn’t fail to address as a part of its political project the emerging frameworks that engender various forms of politics from below. It is only commodity fetishism, which creates the illusion of our independence, that obscures how closely these structures are at work, and how closely entwined material labor is with immaterial, and that revolutionary transformation depends on revolutionary interdependence across social position and type of work.

In today’s context, questions pertaining to immaterial labor and the material circuits and acts that help to sustain it are tied together in examples like the one above from *The Gig Economy*. The span of the pandemic has heightened the conjunctural contradictions of the capital and its many relations (production, distribution, and consumption of commodities,

the social reproduction of forms of labor, etc.), especially including its racially-hierarchizing technologies of governance, surveillance, policing, restricted mobilities, and environmental destruction. Many of the articles in this issue and the forum address the very material effects of present-day immaterial and emotional labor.

A focus on contemporary labor and class relations in the framework of immaterial labor and, more explicitly, the pandemic necessarily raises the issue of social reproduction. In this issue, Sean Cashbaugh's richly sourced article, "Back to Basics with Labor-Power: The Problem of Culture and Social Reproduction Theory," <<https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/back-to-basics-with-labor-power-culture-social-reproduction-theory-cashbaugh/>>

carefully connects the threads of contemporary cultural studies to fundamental and emergent Marxist concepts. Cashbaugh's article sutures nineteenth-century concepts in Marx's thought with twenty-first-century readings of contemporary contradictions and crises. Stressing the "laborious" aspects of immaterial labor, we might interpret, in the context of the pandemic, how Cashbaugh's claim both illuminates and marks the necessary social and cultural complexity of the commodity form. We see, through this claim, the connections between social reproduction and immaterial labor. Cashbaugh states that, ". . . cultural studies scholars rarely consider labor-power as anything other than a fully formed commodity ready for sale in the market, examining it from the standpoint of its circulation rather than its production. This leaves the question of culture's relation to labor-power unanswered and that of culture's sociopolitical function within the current crisis of social reproduction unclear"⁸

On the theme of immaterial labor, Susan Hegeman considers the potential impact of Indigenous performers featured in a pedagogical film series of the 1960s and 1970s in "Arctic Pedagogy: Indigenous People and the MACOS Culture War" <<https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/arctic-pedagogy-indigenous-people-netsilik-inuit-macos-culture-war-hegeman/>>" Man: A Course of Study" (MACOS) was a sweeping curricular shift for public schools, funded by the National Science Foundation, that replaced a "traditional" social studies education in civics and history with "hard" social sciences like anthropology and behavioral psychology. With particular attention to struggles over the MACOS pedagogy's Netsilik Film Series, Hegeman explores how both liberals and conservatives understood the relationship between education, totalitarianism, and national and personal identity during the Cold War. Hegeman describes the steady accumulation of cultural, social, and political forces rallied against MACOS's Indigenous representations in particular, including how outrage and disgust over these representations were central to right-wing coalition building and tactical development in this period. Positioning MACOS and in particular the Netsilik Film Series as an affront to American exceptionalism, conservative politicians used these rhetorical maneuvers to obscure their material interests in extracting resources from Indigenous land, including most famously at Dzilijiiin (Black Mesa). Finally, Hegeman explores how the Netsilik Film Series served as a powerful expression of intellectual sovereignty on the part of Inuit performers, and a counter-tactic of indigenous pedagogy inserted into US curriculum. This history of the MACOS pedagogy provides an important lens for current US struggles around "dog whistle" cultural politics—adopted first by isolated parents and education critics—associated with critical race theory.

In this issue's other article on cultural studies and Indigenous representations, Cécile Heim navigates the politics of representation across the genres of literature and television and depictions of violence in recent popular work. Heim's article "Commodifying Tragedy: Representing Violence against Native American Women in *The Cold Dish* and *Longmire*" <<https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/commodifying-tragedy-representing-violence-against-native-american-women-cold-dish-longmire-heim/>> directs us towards the ways that the logics of settler-colonialism function even and especially in so-called progressive representations of Indigenous peoples in media. By focusing on genre, tropes, and the formal or structural aspects of commodity production, Heim offers a holistic analysis of the white supremacist foundational relationship between representation and settler-colonialism. Tying the histories of settler colonialism to the formal structures of popular narratives, even the well-meaning progressive potential of the representational politics of Indigenous peoples across contemporary media, always run aground on the historical threshold of white, US settler colonialism.

Now, two full years through a pandemic that has uprooted place-based work for many, and forced even more indoors, away from public spaces, and onto screens. In these instances the connections between affect and immaterial labor practices are illuminated by the instructional work that many of us do and are still doing from rooms in our homes repurposed for instruction. In "Coronavirus Pedagogy in the Zoomscape: Pinhole Intimacy Culture Meets Conscientization," <<https://csalateral.org/issue/10-2/coronavirus-pedagogy-zoomoscape-pinhole-intimacy-culture-conscientization-breen/>> Marcus Breen tightens his analytical scope around the kinds of immaterial labor that, as we become more aware of it as work, can be consciously turned into a set of pedagogical strategies and practices Breen shows that these practices when married to critical pedagogies can turn the tables, or mitigate their effects, in the context of institutions' attempts to police labor and learning in the pandemic.

Our latest forum, Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope <<https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/corona-affects-effects/>>, edited by Mattia Fumanti and Elena Zambelli, examines how the current COVID-19 pandemic intersects with other pre-existing and enduring pandemics, such as those produced by racism, capitalism, and speciesism. Contributors offer multimedia reflections on affects triggered or evoked by the current pandemic, such as rage, fear, despair, restraint, care, and hope. Coming from different parts of the globe and disciplinary approaches, authors convey the "Corona(virus) a(e)ffects" in multisensorial ways, combining written essays, poetry, videos, and photographs. In so doing, it provides a space for the expression of radical affectivities of dissent and hope that its outburst has arguably made only more visible and pressing.

As part of the forum, Yannis Kallianos and Pafsaniás Karathanasis' "Public Space as Infrastructure of Care: The Affective Dynamics of Protomagias Square During the Pandemic" <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/public-space-infrastructure-care-protomagias-square-pandemic-kallianos-karathanasis/>> examines public space in Athens, Greece, which reemerged, once again, as a critical site of sociopolitical antagonism during the pandemic. Andrew Brooks and Michael Richardson turn to the affective witnessing in the wake of George Floyd's murder to argue for the flesh as affective register crucial to the building of global anti-racist solidarities in "On

Witnessing a Riot." <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/on-witnessing-a-riot-brooks-richardson/>> Suzanne Enzerink's "Feelings, Fascism, and Futures" <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/feelings-fascism-futures-enzerink/>> focuses on the affect of restraint, which emerged as a defining feature of the pandemic and became racialized, linking both domestic and international uses of restraint to preexisting structures of inequality. Irene Peano's "Within and Against Racial Segregation: Notes from Italy's Encampment Archipelago," <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/within-against-racial-segregation-italys-encampment-archipelago-peano/>> examines how discourses about migrant farm workers in Italy decide upon these subjects' worthiness of attention, care, and sympathy through criminalizing, victimizing, and humanitarian registers. Lasse Mouritzen, Madeleine Kate McGowan, and Kristine Samson let go of the promises of normality, exploring various personal, academic, & aesthetic states—like temporary glimpses of a new world—in "Bewilderment, Hope, and Despair." <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/bewilderment-hope-despair-mouritzen-mcgowan-samson>> Paulina Lanz examines twentieth-century photographs and newspaper stories of the 1918 influenza pandemic in "Cycles of Quotidian Pandemic Instances: Voice(less) Stories from 1918" <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/cycles-of-quotidian-pandemic-instances-voiceless-stories-from-1918-lanz/>> to reveal waves of history, sound, and pandemics, and pushes us to acknowledge what we have unlearned. Snežana Stanković and Linda Paganelli read the pandemic-afflicted (human) world in terms of post-human translation, speaking in images of human-spiders in the forest who sense the radical isolation of humans, in "The Green Color of Grief: Spider-Human Dreams," <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/the-green-color-of-grief-spider-human-dreams-stankovic-paganelli/>> echoing Anna Tsing's call for "collaborative survival." Giulia Carabelli's "Plants, Vegetables, Lawn: Radical Solidarities in Pandemic Times" <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/plants-vegetables-lawn-radical-solidarities-pandemic-times-carabelli/>> explores the meanings of affective bonds and experiences between plants and humans, based on stories collected during social isolation. Frank Karioris' "Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic" <<https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/finding-joy-elegy-poetry-pandemic-karioris/>> reflects on recent literary production addressing the pandemic to elaborate new forms of elegy that understand the importance of new relational possibilities as we move towards a post-pandemic world.

Finally, in this issue we add a crucial piece to the Years in Cultural Studies timeline <<https://csalateral.org/years>> project: 2013, when the first Eastern European international conference on cultural studies was held in Prague. This year marks for authors, Karel Šima, Ondřej Daniel, and Tomáš Kavka, the moment when influences from the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the and the regional and national histories that produced studies of popular culture across Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Yugoslavia congeal. "2013—East by Eastwest: Cultural Studies' Route to Eastern Europe" <<https://csalateral.org/section/years-in-cultural-studies/2013-east-by-eastwest-cultural-studies-route-to-eastern-europe-sima-daniel-kavka/>> provides an expansive critical and regional history of the studies of subcultures and popular culture in Eastern Europe. It explains how the influences of what was called the science of culture or "culturology" (influenced by Russian *kulturologia*) were organic to different societal

relationships which, by necessity, understood relations between culture and power differently from what the authors refer to as "Anglo-American cultural studies" and its Gramscian vocabulary which smacked of a Marxist-Leninism that Russia was moving away from for some time. The article also tracks the influence of ethnology, social and cultural anthropology, cultural sociology, media studies, literary studies, and cultural history to the development of cultural studies in several other Eastern Europe countries. Relying strongly on untranslated sources, the value of this article for our understanding of the international development of contemporary cultural studies is extraordinary.

Notes

1. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133. [D](#)
2. Quoted in Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 76. [D](#)
3. Sara Warner, "Rage Slaves: The Commodification of Affect in The Five Lesbian Brothers' *The Secretaries*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 23, no. 1 (2008), 23, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2008.0013> < <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2008.0013> >. [D](#)
4. Clara Jeffrey and Monika Bauerlein, "All Work and No Pay: The Great Speedup," *Mother Jones*, June 2011, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/06/speed-up-american-workers-long-hours>. [D](#)
5. Warner, "Rage Slaves," 24. [D](#)
6. See, for instance: Lexi McMenamin, "#Striketober Continues As Over 100,000 Workers Prepare to Strike," *Politics, Teen Vogue*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-striketober> < <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-striketober> >. [D](#)
7. Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Todd Wolfson, Brian Dolber, and Chenjerai Kumanyika, "Introduction" in *The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence*, eds. Brian Dolber, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Chenjerai Kumanyika, Todd Wolfson (New York: Routledge 2021), 4. [D](#)
8. Sean Cashbaugh, "Back to Basics with Labor-Power: The Problem of Culture and Social Reproduction Theory," *Lateral* 10, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.2.3> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.2.3> >. [D](#)

Author Information



Robert F. Carley

Robert F. Carley is Associate Professor of International Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station.

[View all of Robert F. Carley's articles.](#)



Stefanie A. Jones

SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores policing, war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, gender, disability, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

[View all of Stefanie A. Jones's articles.](#)



Eero Laine

Eero Laine is an Assistant Professor at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

[View all of Eero Laine's articles.](#)



Chris Alen Sula

Chris Alen Sula is Associate Professor at Pratt Institute's School of Information. His research explores the digital humanities as a field, including curricula, the early history of DH, and disciplinarity. He has also published on citation studies in the humanities, the politics of technology, and ethical uses of data and visualization.

[View all of Chris Alen Sula's articles.](#)

Article details

Robert F. Carley, Stefanie A. Jones, Eero Laine, Chris Alen Sula, "Editors' Introduction: Materializing Immaterial Labor in Cultural Studies," *Lateral* 10.2 (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.2.1>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.